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Research Article



## Aesthetics of *dis-ability*: A Short Study on Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*


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### Abstract

Locke, while writing his Second Treatise on Civil Government in 1689 states that all men by nature are 'free, equal and independent' but is everyone equal? We know by now that equity is

the means through which true equality can be achieved but in order to make a change, we also need to accept the fact that 'normalcy' is nothing but a social construct. All those whom our society regard as 'abnormal', 'incompetent' or 'non-productive' have the right to live as much as 'normal' people do. When it comes to persons with disabilities, it gets even more complicated by the existing taboo. A sense of uneasiness and discomfort prevail whenever we confront bodies *un-like* our own. Some tend to sympathise while others tend to dismiss it altogether. Samuel Beckett tries to break this taboo by making use of characters in his writings who with their decomposing bodies, make an attempt to live the absurdities of life. His characters 'stare at death with passionate attention' but do not commit suicide because they are tenacious enough to live. After all as Molloy says, 'To decompose is to live too'. The paper analyses Beckett's *Endgame* in terms of disability and aesthetics. It aims to explore how the playwright makes use of theatre as a device to shatter the camera obscura that the bourgeoisie order maintains on bodies that it cannot contain. The able-bodied people witness man at his most vulnerable, striving to sustain by taking help of others thereby realising that co-dependency is evident and inevitable.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, Equal, Free, Normalcy, Human Condition, Physical Impairment, Disability Aesthetics, Isolation and Confinement, Existentialism

## Introduction

Disability, like gender, race and sexuality is a product of the nineteenth century medical science but, unlike the rest, it is bound to affect future centuries irrespective of our identities. Martha Nussbaum in her *Frontiers of Justice* mentions how "all the major social contract thinkers choose to imagine their parties as rationally competent adults who, as Locke says, are, in the state of nature, 'free, equal, and independent'" (Nussbaum 104). But not every person is 'free, equal, and independent'. Some have special needs and require special care and help which places them in strife with post-Enlightenment theories of independence, self-reliance and the like. Theories of social justice emphasise equality while excluding the problems of people with cognitive impairment or physical disabilities, overlooking the fact that not every person is well positioned to enter a competition for the goods of social cooperation on equal terms.

## Theatre and *dis-ability*

For the longest time, theatre has contributed to 'the way that some bodies make other bodies feel' (Siebers), thereby coming off as an inclusive space. We have witnessed the blind Oedipus, the mad Ophelia and the deformed body of Richard III in early dramas. Modern drama goes a step further by depicting varieties of human bodies and focuses on trauma, injury and alienation thus stretching the limits of aesthetics and art. Out of all the modernist writers, Samuel Beckett's work stands out for the rejection of autonomy and self-sufficient theories and creation of 'abject dependency' (Davidson 111). All of Beckett's characters are mutually dependent on each other, be it Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky, Hamm and Clov, Mercier and Camier, Winnie and Williewith, most of them being persons with *dis-abilities*. But somehow their disabilities have always been interpreted as markers of solitude and alienation. The major reason might be the nervousness or anxiety that able-bodied people experience when

they encounter a person/people with disabilities. Ato Quayson terms the aesthetic version of this anxiety or nervousness as 'hermeneutical impasse' in his *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*. He observes that when critics encounter disabled characters, they often prefer to see them as metaphors for societal issues instead of a direct representation of physical flaws. By doing so, they can in some ways ignore the material 'discomforts of disability' or the dailyness of *dis-ability*.

There is no doubt regarding the fact that Hamm had inability to walk and Clov is unable to sit down (*Endgame*), Mrs. Rooney, who drags her feet (*All that Fall*) suggests the great pain or anxiety of human beings. However, these tormented bodies, at the very core, suggest the writer's connection with *dis-ability*, his choice to represent the 'non-productive' bodies which have been subalternized in the modern era of science and technology. He challenges the idea of 'normalcy' by depicting characters who exist in an absurd world without metaphysical assurance or ontological support. Their personal relationships are based mostly on survival and contingency rather than on love and care and keep using objects such as sticks, stones and bicycles as prosthesis for mobility. Objects support them, not the rational society. Their bodies gradually decompose and their memories slowly fail with the characters acknowledge, 'To decompose is to live, too' (Beckett 25). Their sense of *being* in the world is organic and does not rely much on messianic support.

### Setting

The characters in *Endgame* inhabit a post-apocalyptic world and the setting is minimalistic like the Noh theatre (Japanese dance drama). The entire play takes place in a bare room with grey lights and two windows on the back wall, one facing the land and the other facing the sea. A door on the right leads to the kitchen and next to it is a picture hanging with its face to the wall. There are two ashbins on the left containing the decrepit Nagg and Nell while Hamm in his wheelchair occupies the centre stage. The cause of impairment, in case of Hamm and Clov is nowhere specified unlike Nagg and Nell who lost their legs in a bicycle accident in Ardennes. Clov, unable to sit with his stiff legs, goes up and down the ladder, looking out of the window with a telescope and keeps reporting to Hamm everything that he sees. The claustrophobic space symbolises death or rather a coffin and there appears to be no other place which is safe or where the characters can find happiness. So, he writes, 'Outside of here it's death' (Beckett 9). Hamm wants 'it' to end (if 'it' is the pain that he is suffering from, then he is waiting for Death; 'it' can also mean the end of the world that they inhabit or the erasure of the entire human race) and Clov yearns to leave Hamm, yet they continue to remain with each other. Hamm keeps Clov because 'There's no one else' (Beckett 8) and Clov remains because 'There's nowhere else' (Beckett 8). They are locked in an interminable relationship, one existing only because the other exists. Clov carries out his master's (Hamm) orders, serving as his master's eyes and legs and in return, his master provides him with food. This reminds us of Prospero and Caliban; the master feeding and teaching his language to the slave while *it* carries out the master's orders faithfully. Though on the surface level, their relationship seems to be only that of a master and a slave or of a father and a son, it can be interpreted on many levels. Clov might be the care *giver* that a person with disabilities, like Hamm here, requires or they

might be sublimated lovers, or a sadist and a masochist interlocker 'locked in a phenomenological embrace' (Catanzaro 168).

Clov too has deformities, unlike Hamm who is blind and cannot stand, Clov can't sit and they acknowledge their disabilities often to highlight their reciprocal relationship:

HAMM: Sit on him!

CLOV: I can't sit.

HAMM: True. And I can't stand.

CLOV: So it is.

HAMM: Every man his specialty (Beckett 10).

This conversation suggests the 'reciprocal dependency' that Hamm and Clov share whereby, 'each partner counts on the other for survival or comfort, in which each is simultaneously the dependent of and provider for the other' (Memmi 24). Similarly, Nagg and Nell are dependent on each other and on Clov and Hamm too, Nell scratches Nagg's back and gives him kisses and Nagg saves food for her. Clov changes the sawdust and Hamm provides them with food. It can be said that Beckett's delineation of dependent relation is always asymmetrical and comes with imbalances in power relations and this asymmetry is what is highlighted through the master-slave dialectic or through a parody of Christianity.

Beckett presents us the harsher realities of family dynamics where the verbal battles between the characters comprise the action of the play. However, it must be noted that these verbal fights arise from a much deeper, pent up frustration within the characters. Alienation is definitely a reason but it can be alienation due to corporeal differences and not just due to death or decay in a post-apocalyptic universe. Also, the cause for the presence of disability in a number of Beckett's writing can be attributed to the author's personal connection with it. The writer's mother had suffered from Parkinson's and had lost her life due to it. According to Anthony Cronin, *Endgame* 'has its genesis in the life and circumstances of Cissie Sinclair toward the close of her days' (Cronin 459), Cissie Sinclair being the writer's aunt who suffered from rheumatoid arthritis. By projecting corporeal differences in his works, Beckett did not obviously think of making any changes with respect to disability rights and social justice but by making use of disabled characters, he challenges the inherent notion of the condition belonging not to 'us' but just to 'them'. The 'abject dependency' that Beckett portrays is quintessential because to be truly independent one must recognize the contingent relation that he has with others. The obsession regarding autonomy has caused the society to look down upon those who maintain dependent relations. This makes 'disability' a partly stigmatised spectrum. A disabled person requires another person's help and hence, is perceived as weak, incapable of surviving without 'able' support. Medical intervention is required to fix the 'defect' and death is a better option if they cannot be 'fixed' because disabled and aged have no place in a society that is principally guided by utilitarian transaction.

### **Issue of double bind**

Hamm's yearning to lead a 'normal' life like an able-bodied person can be sensed more than once in the play. He wishes to sleep, to make love, to go places like any other person, "If I could sleep I might make love. I'd go into the woods. My eyes would see... the sky, the earth. I'd

run, run, they wouldn't catch me..." (Beckett). Like a clairvoyant, he predicts Clov's future making us realise that he wishes every other person to suffer like he does:

One day you'll be blind, like me. You'll be sitting there, a speck in the void, in the dark, forever, like me . . . Infinite emptiness will be all around you, all the resurrected dead of all the ages wouldn't fill it, and there you'll be like a little bit of grit in the middle of the steppe. (Pause.) Yes, one day you'll know what it is, you'll be like me, except that you won't have anyone with you, because you won't have had pity on anyone and because there won't be anyone left to have pity on. (Beckett 36)

Hamm understands that the pain that he suffers from can only be perceived by those who suffer like him. Clov is disabled as well but he is more able-bodied than Hamm. But one must consider that that type of *dis-ability* is a disability and therefore, matters. Hamm is doubly handicapped for he is blind and a wheelchair user. Hamm's fear of getting de-centred stems mostly from his realisation that being the master, he is physically powerless when compared to his slave. He realises that it might be that Clov stays out of pity. So, in order to mask his dependency and to maintain his superiority, Hamm bullies Clov and gets his way. His custom of storytelling which Clov and Nagg need to attend daily further helps in maintaining his autocracy.

The most interesting aspect of the play is its defiance of any stable referent or interpretation. It can be interpreted in a number of ways and that is where complications occur because most of the time the cipher for disability is rejected or neglected for other metaphorical implications. An air of uneasy *double bind* prevails in the play: when throughout the play, the audience is made to witness physical impairments and disability, fear gets hold of them making them realise their pain and suffering, yet at the same time, they are constantly trying to convince themselves that this is a play that they are watching and they are actors who are performing. As Brixby states,

"The Endgame project, in other words, does not relegate pain to a shadowy part of the consciousness, nor assimilate the body in pain to some philosophical category; but neither does it insist on medicalizing the disabled body and thus appealing to the desire of the audience for normalcy in the form of a medical cure. Rather, it dramatizes the very real ethical problem of how we are to give witness to others who may or may not be suffering and raises the ethical question of how we, in the theatre, might adequately respond to what we see on the stage" (Brixby 122).

The best way to make an impact on the audience would be to get disabled actors to enact the play. According to Quayson, odours similar to that of hospitals would help the audience to acknowledge 'the condition of immobility and discomfort displaced on stage' (Quayson 67).

### Conclusion

The play like most of Beckett's other plays is open ended and it depends on the audience to decide whether they feel that Clov is capable of leaving Hamm and eking out a new life or whether he is comfortable working for his master throughout the rest of his life. The endgame remains unresolved, for the playwright does not believe that there is any 'post-diluvian life beyond dependence' (Brixby 124). The little boy brings a ray of hope but if the boy remains alive,

Clov shall re-establish Hamm's regime of dominance over him. The final scene comes with a promise of repetition all over again:

Clov: This is what we call making an exit.

Hamm: I'm obliged to you, Clov. For your services.

Clov (turning sharply.): Ah, pardon, it's I am obliged to you.

Hamm: It's we are obliged to each other. (Beckett 81)

The camera obscura that the bourgeoisie order maintains on the bodies that it cannot contain or even imagine for that matter needs to be shattered. Space needs to be made for disabled people and it can best be made through proper activism and performance. It needs to be realized and understood that 'one is not born disabled; one becomes disabled through the objectifying gaze of compulsory able-bodiedness' (Davidson 117). Beckett has made an attempt to encounter the awkward stares of the able-bodied people by depicting characters who with "their acts of looking and being seen tend to foreground the performative features—theatricality—of such constitutive acts of sight. Their attempts to negotiate a landscape that is inaccessible (whether because of limited mobility or because of an absent God) frame 'bare forked man' at his most vulnerable" (Davidson 117).

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